

Villa Montalvo
(James Duval Phelan House)
Montalvo Road
Saratoga Vicinity
Santa Clara County
California

HABS No. CA-2048

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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

ADDENDUM
FOLLOWS

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Architectural and Engineering Record
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20243

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. CA-2048

VILLA MONTALVO
(James Duval Phelan House)

Location: Montalvo Road, Saratoga, Santa Clara County, California.
USGS Castle Rock Ridge Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 10.586040.4122160.

Present Owner and Occupant: Montalvo Association.

Present Use: Montalvo Center for the Arts.

Significance: Villa Montalvo was built in 1912-1914 in the style of a sixteenth century Italian villa from the designs of the noted San Francisco architects Curlett and Gottschalk, and was formally landscaped by the Bay area's most renowned landscape architect, John McLaren. Villa Montalvo was originally the home of one of the region's greatest philanthropists, James Duval Phelan, one time Mayor of San Francisco and U.S. Senator. Phelan played host to dozens of notables in the political and art worlds at the estate, which remains one of the most visually impressive residential complexes in Santa Clara County.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1912-14.
2. Architects: William Curlett & Sons.

Montalvo was designed by the architectural firm of Curlett & Sons, the work of principal architects C.E. Gottschalk and Aleck Curlett (Phelan Papers).

William Curlett (1845-1914) was a native of Belfast, Ireland and educated at the Art Institute of Manchester. He immigrated to San Francisco in 1877, and by 1880 had established his own practice. Together with Theodore Eisen, Curlett designed the Los Angeles Courthouse in 1888, a Romanesque style building, and in 1891 an addition to the Fresno courthouse. He is also credited with having designed the Shreve Building and the Stockton Insane Asylum. Curlett served as president of the San Francisco chapter of the American Institute of Architects, and the State Board of Architects.

Aleck E. Curlett (1800-1942), the son of William, was educated in San Francisco, and joined his father's San Francisco firm after completing his formal studies. He practiced a few years with Gottschalk after his father's death in 1914, and in 1919 Aleck formed a new firm with Claude Beelman in Los Angeles. The firm's prominent buildings in the Los Angeles area include Union Oil, the Roose Office, Pacific Southern Trust and Savings, Heinsburger Decorating, the Elks Temple Buildings, and the Firestone Tire and Rubber Plant. After the earthquake of 1933, Curlett was appointed head of the Los Angeles County School Reconstruction Board, and later served as director of U.S. Housing Administration projects in the area.

Charles E. Gottschalk (1864-1929) was born and educated in San Francisco and began his architectural career in Pasadena, California. He later transferred to Chicago to work in the office of Shepley, Rutan and Coolidge, the successor to H.H. Richardson's architectural firm, and the firm who designed Stanford University Quadrangle, Palo Alto, in 1891. Gottschalk returned to San Francisco in 1899 and joined the Curlett's firm, practicing with Aleck Curlett until 1919. He established an independent office in 1920, working until his death in 1929.

3. Original and subsequent owners: The Montalvo estate includes 175 acres of land. The tract lies within Section 17, Township 8 South, Range 2 West, Mount Diablo Base and Meridian, recorded in Book of Maps M, page 99. The five acres immediately surrounding the house are maintained by the Montalvo Arts Association; the remainder is managed by the County of Santa Clara, Department of Parks and Recreation. The following deed references are located in the Office of the Recorder. Santa Clara County Courthouse, Santa Clara.

1911 Deed, July 10, 1911, recorded July 17, 1911 in Book 373, page 55. Charles W. Fay, et ux, sold property to James D. Phelan.

1911 Deed, August 18, 1911, recorded August 19, 1911 in Book 373, page 310. Charles W. Fay, et ux, sold property to James D. Phelan.

1911 Deed, August 22, 1911, recorded in Book 373, page 332. Mary C. Dunham, et al, sold property to James D. Phelan.

1911 Deed, September 29, 1911, recorded November 19, 1911 in Book 376, page 356. G.L. Cunningham sold property to James D. Phelan.

- 1911 Deed, October 11, 1911, recorded November 19, 1911 in Book 376, page 361. Thomas N. Perkins sold property to James D. Phelan.
- 1911 Deed, October 27, 1911, recorded in Book 376, page 506. Emma J. Cushman, et vir, sold property to J.D. Phelan.
- 1913 Deed August 6, 1931, recorded in Book 580, page 312. Estate of James D. Phelan sold the property to the San Francisco Art Association.
- 1953 Deed, October 27, 1953, recorded in Book 2763, page 95. Pursuant to order #384913, in equity of the Superior Court of the State of California, sold the property to Montalvo Association.
4. Original plan and construction: The 175-acre estate is made up largely of the 137-acre tract of land formerly known as "Bonnie Brae Ranch," which was held in multiple ownership. Construction of Villa Montalvo began in 1912 on a virtually barren hillside site. Phelan supervised the construction before leaving for Europe in 1913, in his capacity as the Commissioner of the upcoming Panama-Pacific International Exposition of 1915. Construction was completed in the fall of 1914 (Phelan Papers).

Curlett and Gottschalk's design for Montalvo was published in Architect and Engineer of California, September 1914, and in Overland Monthly Magazine, April 1915. During the villa's construction in May 1913 Aleck Curlett and Phelan revised details of the Library's original plan: "The panel work in alcove near window cut out and book case substituted for same for \$40, making total changes in library up to time (Curlett) left cost \$390." Also noted are "changes in billiard room and den amounting to \$250 (Phelan Papers, "Aleck Curlett").

Gottschalk assumed supervision of the construction in the spring of 1913, when William Curlett became seriously ill and Aleck went to Los Angeles to be with his father. By May, nearing completion, the house's thirty-five screens had been fitted into the south dining porch, the hardware and refrigerator door were installed, the switch-board cabinet and the door to the billiard room's lavatory were hung, and the vacuum cleaner pipes outlet had been installed in the stair-hall.

Villa Montalvo was named after the 16th century Spanish novelist Ordonez de Montalvo, author of the novel Segas de Esplandran (1510), the first known publication in which the name "California" appears. A motif central to the novel's story is the griffin, a mythical animal with the body and hind legs of a lion and the head and wings

of an eagle. This 16th century motif is represented at Montalvo in the estate's entrance gateposts, designed by Gottschalk. On a wall of the west (rear) courtyard is a plaque by California artist J.J. Mora that is inscribed with a verse written by Phelan: "MDXXI, know Ordonez de Montalvo's fame; Did he not see in Fantasy our California grow out of old Spain; Conferred her Name; Foretold her God; a PARADISE: FOR EAGER EYES: HIS DREAM COME TRUE FOR ME AND YOU: MCMXII."

While Phelan was in Europe promoting participation in the Pan-Pacific Exposition, he purchased in Granada a pair of 400-year-old carved wooden doors for the north entry. A stained-glass transom overhead depicts the Spanish explorer Cabrillo's ship "San Salvador."

Novelist Gertrude Atherton, Phelan's constant companion of later years, had her own room in the second floor of Montalvo. She wrote of the house as it was in the 1920s:

"The terrace was approached by a broad high flight of steps but the main entrance was on the north side where there was another terrace enclosed in glass, vine covered and furnished with lounging chairs and marbles. Out of this terrace opened a library with lounging chairs and marbles. Out of this terrace opened a library with crowded book shelves rising to the ceiling which in turn opened to an immense living room and beyond was the lofty dining room hung with crimson brocade. The billiard room was across the hall from the library and like the living room opened on the court. Upstairs were six large bedrooms each with its bath and balcony, and on the other side of the drive overhanging the creek and almost hidden in the woods, was the Guest House, to which bachelor visitors were generally relegated. The main house was luxuriously and beautifully furnished with many valuable pictures and works of art that Mr. Phelan had picked up in Europe, was always dim and cool on the hottest days; although if there were a large party down for the day only, they preferred to sit on the terraces and sip iced orange juice and lemonade." (Atherton, 547).

5. Alterations and additions: In 1923 a local contractor, T. Mahoney, completed the following projects:

Installed pantry refrigerator	\$ 113
Two-room house	1121
Dog kennel	728
Deer paddock	276
Dog houses	55
Rustic observatory	538
Fire house	413

Repairs to Red House	232
Repairs to Cunningham House	230
Repairs to Wilson House	181
Painting Tennis Court	129
Greenhouse extension	783
Vineyard fence	162
Cleaning and scraping pool	76.61
Lattice fence	32
General repairs and painting	280

The kennels and tennis courts remain, all other buildings listed have been removed from the estate.

The estate stood vacant after Phelan's death in 1930 until it was acquired by the San Francisco Art Association in 1938 and renovated into an artists' colony. Phelan stipulated in his will that:

Villa Montalvo is to be maintained as a public park open to the public under reasonable restrictions, the buildings and grounds immediately surrounding same to be used as far as possible for the development of art, paintings, music and architecture by promising students.

To that end I give said property to the San Francisco Art Association, together with the sum of \$250,000. the income of which shall be used for the maintenance of same.

San Francisco architects Spencer, Blanchard & Maher drew up the working drawings for the renovation, which included gallery and studio space, a small theatre, and remodeling the guesthouse and stables for studio use. The drawings are dated 1938 and 1943, but were not executed.

In 1951 the trustees of Montalvo Association assumed control of the estate and in the mid-50s Montalvo was remodeled as a sculptors' studio according to the 1938 specifications. The original kitchen became a ceramics studio.

Subsequent restoration projects were undertaken by San Jose architects Higgins & Root in 1961, and again in 1974. The main house was rewired and repaired so as to meet fire code standards as an art gallery. The library's built-in shelves were removed to make the room's design more harmonious with the exhibition space in the original living room. Administrative offices are housed in the southeast service wing. Second-floor bedroom suites were remodeled as kitchenettes. To the southeast of the house a stage and emergency exit have been installed in the carriage house.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Original architectural drawings: Color-wash rendering of entrance gates, C.E. Gottshalk, n.d. In the possession of the Director of Montalvo.

2. Old views:

Interior and exterior views, published in an article by J.S. Cahill, Architect and Engineer, September 1914, pp. 47-57.

Interior view and northwest garden, published in an article by Mira MacLay, Sunset Magazine, February 1926, pp. 14-16.

3. Bibliography:

- a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Interviews:

C. Barati, Director of Montalvo, August 5, 1977.
Gerald Erickson, Architect who worked on Montalvo renovation under Chester Root's direction, August 11, 1977.

Phelan Papers, Bancroft Library, Manuscript Collection,
University of California, Berkeley, California.

Santa Clara County Deed Records, Office of the Recorder,
Santa Clara County Courthouse, 70 West Hedding Street,
San Jose, California.

- b. Secondary and published sources:

Atherton, Gertrude. Adventures of a Novelist. New York:
Liveright, Inc. 1932.

Cahill, J.S. "The Country Home of Hon. J.D. Phelan," The Architect and Engineer of California, Vol. XXXVIII,
No. 2 (September 1914), pp. 47-57.

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Stanford University Press, 1947.

Doss, Margot, Patterson. Golden Gate Park at Your Feet.
San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1970.

- Kaucher, Dorothy. James Duval Phelan: A Potrait.
Saratoga, CA: Montalvo Associates, 1965.
- Kirker, Harold. California's Architectural Frontier.
Santa Barbara, CA: Peregrine Smith, Inc., 1973.
- McLaren, John. Gardening in California: Landscape and Flowers. San Francisco: A.M. Robertson, 1914.
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Overland Monthly April 1915.
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Vol. XIV, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1945,
pp. 523-524.
- Older, Cora. San Francisco; Magic City. New York:
Longmans, Green & Co., 1961.
- Withey, Henry and Elsie Rathburn. Biographical Dictionary
of American Architects (Deceased). Los Angeles:
New Age Publishing Co., 1956.

Prepared by: Carolyn Hamm
Project Historian
Historic American
Buildings Survey
August, 1977

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: It is one of the few remaining "grand" houses of the early part of the century in California. It has remained intact with buildings maintained in good condition and with only minor modifications. Its architectural significance lies in its completely conceived and executed integration of buildings and grounds in a harmonious design that relates naturally to the beauty of the surrounding landscape. Its 177 acres provide a completely protected environment of peace and relaxation, ideally fulfilling its purpose of public and private enjoyment of nature and the arts.

2. Condition of fabric: Excellent.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The house is U-shaped with a 40' x 104' central block with wings of 14' x 48' and 34' x 48'. An extended serving wing is 34' x 60'.
2. Foundations: Reinforced concrete; the basement walls are concrete with brick veneer.
3. Wall construction, finish and color: The walls are composed of wood stud with exterior sheathing and stucco.
4. Structural system, framing: The framing is concrete on the first floor with wood frame above.
5. Porches, stoops, balconies: The major rooms of the house open onto spacious terraces and courtyards around the entire house. Covered porches and loggias have an area of 2,380 sq. feet.
6. Chimneys: Three brick chimneys serve five fireplaces.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The entrance has double carved wood panel doors from Spain. Typical interior doors are single panel eucalyptus matching the wood paneling of the main rooms. Doors between central living area and flanking rooms are glazed.
 - b. Windows and shutters: Lower floor has French windows with bronze hardware. All other windows are wood casements and are divided by muntins.
8. Roof: The central tile roof is hipped with a tile gable roof over the service wing. Covered porches have level, built up roofing. Overhanging eaves of porches have classical cornices and projecting lattice.
9. Other features:

The flooring is parquet oak. Walls and ceilings are plastered throughout, with boxed wood beams in first floor rooms. Cornices are molded in wood or plaster. The major stair is monumental in design, finished in eucalyptus. Its feature is a pictorial stained glass window at the landing. The second floor sitting and sleeping rooms open to balconies and are entered through a spacious gallery with a barrel vaulted ceiling.

The lower court is enclosed by wings of the house. It has a center marble fountain and a large bronze wall fountain with its historical plaque relating the origin of "Montalvo" as a name. This fountain is flanked by a pair of monumental stairs leading to a Garden Court. This upper court is enclosed by trellised colonnades and a pavilion. Backing up to the Garden Court is an amphitheatre accomodating five hundred people; the seating rises up the hillside and is surrounded by a circle of linden trees that border the natural wooded slopes above.

C. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: Villa Montalvo was carefully sited between two creeks on a sloping ridge that allowed a 2000 ft. north-south axis of gardens terminating in garden structures of architectural importance, with overviews of the Santa Clara Valley at one end and the steep wooded hillsides at the other. The 177-acre setting in the foothills of the Coast Range gives complete privacy for the villa and gardens. The immediate surroundings are residential estates along the one-half mile entrance roadway from the Los Gatos-Saratoga road.

2. Outbuildings:

Carriage House: A 64' octagonal garage with center turntable, now a 299 seat theatre.

Guest House: A multi-level building with guest apartments which open to a generously proportioned studio containing a small stage.

Sculpture Studio: A picturesque thatched roof small building.

Temples: Two - one rectangular and one circular, are focal points of garden axis. Both are classic in style.

Buildings and grounds remain substantially in their original condition as designed. The sixty year period since it was completed has allowed for the growth of many trees and specimen shrubs, so that the barren hillscape is greatly changed. It is maintained as an arboretum by the Park and Recreation Department of Santa Clara County. Only minor changes have been made in the buildings and gardens to accomodate their use as a cultural center open to the public. Alterations and additions include:

Swimming pool - filled in because of the impossibility of supervision has created a garden court of considerable beauty.

Library - converted to art gallery.

Screened porch, east side - replaced with glass; no architectural changes.

Second floor and Guest House - converted to apartments for residents.

Front terrace and basement - new waterproofed concrete and brick pavement and repair of structure below.

New steps at east end of terrace - conforming to architectural detail.

Prepared by: Robert Brueggmann
Project Supervisor
Historic American
Buildings Survey
Summer 1977

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings survey in cooperation with the County of Santa Clara. The 1977 summer project, the first year of a four-year recording project in Santa Clara County, was completed under the general direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS; Kenneth L. Anderson, Jr., Principal Architect; and Robert Brueggmann, Project Supervisor (University of Pennsylvania); with Jack Shafer, Architectural Foreman (University of Cincinnati); Carolyn Hamm, Historian (Duke University); and student architects Tim Allenbrook (Rhode Island School of Design), Barbara Hendricks (University of Texas), and Jeff Lees (University of Oklahoma), at the HABS Field Office in Saratoga, California. The historical and architectural data were edited and in some cases further researched during the summer of 1979 by Jan Cigliano, an architectural historian on the HABS staff, at the 1979 Field Office in Santa Clara, California. Photographs were taken by photographer Jane Lidz, summer 1980.

ADDENDUM TO
VILLA MONTALVO
(JAMES DUVAL PHELAN HOUSE)
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
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